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The Physiognomy of Buffalo:

THE ANNUAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE BUFFALO HISTORICAL SOCIETY, JAN. 13, 1864.

BY GEORGE W. HOSMER.

THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF BUFFALO:

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BY GEORGE W. HOSMER.

MEMBERS OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, AND LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

My address must be historical; it shall be chiefly pertinent to the rise, growth, and character of our city; my subject is the Physiognomy of Buffalo.

But in times like these, when momentous history is being made, and we are all so anxiously looking upon passing events, and straining forward to descry coming destinies,—our threatened nationality to be maintained and liberty secured,—our wealth and ourselves held ready for the public need,—our young men to be given up if their country calls them,—the dead to be mourned, and the living, in perils of warfare, to be followed with painful apprehensions; amidst such experiences, it is not easy to reverse the machinery, and turning back, leave the mighty crowd of daily events, and content oneself with gathering traditions and memories, and picturing the past. And yet good may come from occasional diversion of interest; the balance and health of our faculties are sometimes lost by long and intense concentration. When we grow feverish with anxiety, impatient with what must be borne, it may do us good to wrench the mechanism, and turn backward for a little while; by no means to neglect our duties in the present, no, not for an hour, but to maintain true poise and soundness of life, and have ourselves in readiness for right decisions and strenuous action.

Once wrested away from passing events, we soon find satisfaction in searching, and picturing to ourselves, the beginnings and progress of customs, institutions, and society,—from the oak back to the acorn,—from the Amazon back to its everlasting snow-drift fountains,—from these United States to those frail tempest-tossed vessels that felt their way to Virginia, to Massachusetts, to New York.

A few weeks ago, I was in a smart young town of Michigan, scarcely thirty years old, which is rapidly assuming the airs of a city; and in the house of one of the first settlers, I saw two pictures; rude enough they were, and yet there was nature in them, and manifold suggestion. The artist was among the early settlers. One picture represented the first three or four cabins in Kalamazoo; women and children about the doors;

the first doctor, on horseback, talking with a man at his cabin door, ~~politely~~ giving him a prescription for fever and ague, and ready to ride far and near to forest homes, to keep souls and bodies from shaking asunder; and in the distance was seen the good Indian missionary, coming on his mule to welcome the settlers, and raise the voice of prayer and worship in their new home. The other picture was of the first trial by jury in that county, in a log cabin. There were the Judges, the Sheriff, the Lawyers, the Jury, the parties concerned.

These pictures sized my imagination; from those solid blocks of stores and dwellings, and all the bustling life, I was back with the Romulus and Remus of the settlement, suckled by the wolf of savagery and hardship—with those men and women who there gave themselves, like all first settlers, to win for their successors one of the finest towns in the finest country anywhere to be seen. Would that a painter had been here with our Romulus of Buffalo, Mr. Joseph Elliott, to show him to us as he rode on horseback with Mrs. James Brisbane in 1802. Through the forest trees, not far from where we are now, he pointed to the Lake and River seen through the leaves, and assured her that a great city must arise here. We should like another picture of him standing by his compass in what now is Main street, in front of the Churches; so confident is he that commerce must come here and pour out her horn of plenty, that he has resolved to lay out a city; so delighted is he with the grandeur of the situation, that he thinks he will make his home here: he selects for himself a noble manor, one hundred acres of land, between Eagle and Swan streets, and from Main nearly to Jefferson street—almost enough for a principality in Germany—and determines to build upon the western front looking towards the Lake; so here, upon what is to be the site of his house, he stands by his compass, indicating the lines which are now our streets—Main street running north and south upon the crown of land; Church street directly front from his door to the water; Erie street to the mouth of the Creek, where commerce must come; Niagara street to Black Rock Ferry, which was a great institution in the early day; and so on to the completion of the plan.

Mr. Elliott, in laying out our city, had large ideas, and worked upon a grand scale. There is originality in the plan. He did not bring a map of New York, or Boston, or Albany, and lay it down here; he wrought upon the inspiration of a magnificent hope, and we are greatly indebted to him for the open, handsome face of our city.

It is reported that Mr. Elliott said, "God had made Buffalo, and he must try to make Batavia." God did make the place and its surroundings; the wooded ridge gently sloping towards the sun—the Lake stretching far away to the west, and pouring its unceasing flood along the majestic Niagara close by—the Canada shore—the Chautauque and Cattaraugus hills—and the high lands of Evans, Aurora, and Wales—all together, as seen from the Reservoir on Niagara street, is a noble panorama. I love to take strangers to see it. God made these surroundings and back-ground to relieve and set off our city's face, and He gives the contour of the physiognomy; but particular features are defined, and expression is given, by the streets and squares. Philadelphia, with its checker-board arrangement, looks set, precise, demure. Boston Common, and the newly made parts of that city, are very beautiful, but the most of its features are painfully contracted and snarled up. The face of New York is much too long for its breadth, and the forehead is still engaging into monstrous proportions; cerebral diseases may be

feared. State street in Albany, and Capitol Square at its head, are like the fine nose and imperial brow of a noble face; but many of the features of Albany are cramped and distorted, as if the old builders, remembering little Holland, had still felt pinched for room, and so lived under the hill, fighting against the floods of the Hudson, as their fathers had fought against the Zuyder Zee, instead of stretching over the slightly summits.

Our city has no neighboring hills, like Albany and Cincinnati, to heighten expression; but its plan and streets, for beauty, health and convenience, I think, are unrivalled. There is enough irregularity to prevent tiresome monotony, and not enough to create confusion. Mr. Ellicott, I suppose, intended Niagara Square should be the centre of his city; from that point the streets run off in all directions—eight broad avenues—and at night, when these streets are lighted, from that point in the square where they all centre, they make a grand show, double lines of light stretching off into the surrounding darkness. This square did not become the centre of the city, because the State reserved a mile strip along the Niagara river, and so Buffalo was thrown to the east and south, in a measure interrupting the perfection of Mr. Ellicott's plan. But as it has turned out, we have received a largess of favor from his liberal designing; he gave to the city a good, comely face. But many of us can remember when the face of Buffalo was rather rough, and parts of the year too dirty, with mire, for washing to do any good. Main street was as broad as Mr. Ellicott laid it out, but its mud was said to have no bottom. I have seen teams sloughed on Mohawk street, near Delaware; and one team I remember seeing sunk so deep, that it seemed to be going through, until another team was brought to drag out and rescue the sinkers. I saw a young lady, one day, sloughed in the middle of Pearl street, near Tupper, so that she could not step without leaving behind her shoes and overshoes, perhaps the whole foot apparel; and there she stood, with a patience peculiar to those days, until I got boards and made a way for her poor feet. It was found, every spring and fall, that the face of Buffalo was too soft. Gradually our fine pavements for street and sidewalk have been extended, the best I know anywhere, and now we have fifty-two miles of paved streets—so well graded that nowhere is there steepness enough to be inconvenient for heavy draughts, and everywhere there is descent enough to make quick and cleanly drainage. The physiognomy of Buffalo owes more than we think of to the excellent system of sewerage planned and recommended by Mr. Oliver G. Steele, and adopted more than twenty years ago; it has been gradually extended according to the original plan, until now we have fifty-four miles of sewers, all working, in their hidden ways, for the health and beauty of our city. O, those dirty-faced, foul-breathed cities without sewers! Chicago, Washington, Baltimore, and parts of New York, in a hot morning of August or September, have not faces fit to be seen, and the atmosphere in the by-places is loaded with disease. We have fifty-six miles of gas pipes, and thirty-three miles of water pipes, filling streets and houses with light, and furnishing water to extinguish fires, promote cleanliness, and add to the comforts of home.

By all these outward means, costing about \$2,000,000 in the aggregate, our city's physiognomy, which, though grand, was rude and shaggy at first, has been smoothed, refined, and beautified. We all know, in regard to human physiognomy, what wonders are wrought by the surface touches of hatters, barbers, and milliners; so has the face of our city been made comely.

But physiognomy depends much upon the soul within. A face may have good contour, fine complexion, elegant surroundings, the features well enough, and yet be blank, unmeaning. There can be no grand physiognomy without the illumination of a grand soul. I have watched college classes of young men, and seen the light of intelligence, and the delicate lines and touches of refinement coming into their faces, as their minds and hearts were raised and dignified by generous culture; unpromising heads and homely faces sometimes made glorious, from the animating spirit that came out visible, radiate, in eye and features.

The physiognomy of cities takes characteristic airs and expression from the spirit of builders and citizens. The cities of the middle ages, those strongholds, surrounded by walls, frowning with castles and towers, grew out of the belligerent spirit of cruel barbarism; and the physiognomy of those old feudal towns is like that of roughs and prize-fighters, by dreadful discipline made up to maul, or be mauled to death. The old castellated mount of Edinburgh seems still clenching its fists, and gritting its teeth with the ancient Scottish hate of England; and York and Chester wear the stern features which the Romans gave them to overawe the ancient Britons. The towns and very hamlets of Wales still look grim and defiant toward England.

The French have built Paris, and how the spirit of France appears in the gay, showy capital! No place in the world like it to enjoy oneself, to be comfortable, to have pleasant sights, and endless diversions, amusements, and scientific curiosities; it can take the weary, hard-worked man, and keep him busy in pleasant ways until he is rested; it can take the poor hypochondriac, and make him laugh himself into health. Gay, interesting, smiling Paris—the worldling's heaven—it is the ultimate result, the *chef d'œuvre* of the French spirit. Paris is France, and in its face shows the soul of the nation,—the theatre more than the church—enjoyment more than virtue—the life that is, more than that which has not come yet.

We turn now to the physiognomy of our own city. It is a comely, noble face—open and generous, thoughtful and earnest—not grim with knotted muscles, as though born out of combat, nor soft with blandishments for the merely sensuous nature. I like the face; it has a common-sense look of business, and yet it has æsthetic expression of convenience and beauty, and best of all, a wise, serious look; public school-houses among the fine buildings on the slightly avenues,—and the churches more conspicuous and beautiful than the theatre. Business, knowledge, beauty, religion, are in the features of our city, more than pleasure and diversions. Cities take their physiognomy, in large degree, from the spirit of their builders and citizens: we expect the child to possess its parents' qualities and tendency. Who were the fathers, and mothers, and builders of Buffalo, and were they such men and women as, according to our philosophy, we must presume them to be?

Mr. Ellicott, who first saw the possibility of a large city here, was no doubt a man of fine natural sense, and far-sighted; he saw what no one else could, or did see, for many years; and long after he had laid out the city, and in his own mind saw the streets made, and lined with blocks of stores and houses, emigrants from the East, refusing opportunities here, went on to Chautauqua and to New Connecticut, not believing a word of Mr. Ellicott's about the certainty of a large city at the foot of Lake Erie. Men were slow to see that a great commerce must grow up on these Lakes. They could not comprehend the possibilities of the vast wilderness and prairies of the West; and the settlers that

came in here to the hamlet and village of Buffalo, from the beginning even up to 1816, had not begun to believe in Mr. Ellicott's prophecy. They came here to make a living by the local trade, and perhaps secure something by advance of village lots; but very few cared much for the great city plan, with its Dutch named avenues and streets. Though General Washington, thirty years before, on a journey to Central and Northern New York, had foreseen western settlement and commerce, and though Mr. Ellicott saw a city here, the ordinary men said, what chance for commerce here, while the creek has to make a new mouth for itself, every spring, through the shifting sands of the Lake shore? And yet commerce did increase, and Buffalo dragged along until it was burned up; then it arose again, and after the war was over, new men came, with new ideas, and great expectations. Western emigration began to be an astounding fact, and far-sighted men saw what must be the consequence of it; ways of communication must be opened between West and East; a great canal must be made from the Hudson to Lake Erie, and at the western terminus of that canal, wherever it be, there must be a large commercial city. Such thoughts and conclusions drew bright, enterprising men to this vicinity, to Black Rock, and Buffalo, from the new settlements of Western New York, and from New England, especially from Connecticut. Superior men came looking after the great opportunity. Where should the city be?

Gen. Peter B. Porter, an energetic, imperative man, a distinguished officer in the war that had lately closed, graced with the laurels he had won, and influential in the whole State, said the canal must come to Black Rock, and there the city must be; and he and his friends prevailed so far as to procure large State appropriations for the Black Rock harbor, and they felt so confident, that Black Rock was laid out for a great city. Meantime Buffalo was struggling for recognition of her position and claims. We can hardly conceive of the intense rivalry of these two localities, which now are both Buffalo. It was a struggle of some years. No pains, and no money that could be had, were spared by the rival places to draw in influential inhabitants. Black Rock said that Buffalo Creek had no mouth, and no harbor could be made here; and Buffalo said that Black Rock would be swept down the Niagara as soon as it attempted to have wharves and shipping; and besides, said Buffalo, its face made up into an interrogation point, how are vessels to get up through the swift water from Black Rock into the Lake? Oxen were used tugging the first vessels up the shore. Was commerce always to go by ox-power, by what the sailors called a horned breeze?

The contest was at its height from 1820 to 1823. In the summer of 1821 or 1822, an eventful meeting took place in Buffalo. The Canal Commissioners held a session in the Dancing Hall of the Eagle tavern. The object of meeting here was to consider the claims of Buffalo to be the western terminus of the Erie Canal. It was life or death to Buffalo, as they all thought. Would that we had a true picture of that meeting. Mr. Joseph Dart was an eye-witness, and has given me some account of it. DeWitt Clinton was chairman of the Commissioners, and Stephen Van Rensselaer the patroon, Henry Seymour, Myron Holley, and Samuel Young, were his associates,—an august company! The great question was, Black Rock or Buffalo? Gen. Porter was the chief advocate for Black Rock; and with shrewd ability, for which he was so distinguished, he advocated the cause of the dwellers by the River side. The chief advocate for Buffalo was Judge Wilkeson. He was not a lawyer, not much used to public speaking, never trained and

cultured in schools or college, but a man of great natural force, vigorous common sense and mighty will, with courage and hope born out of his rugged strength. Educated by the rough, earnest struggles of border life, he had made his way here, and saw at once the practical bearings of this great question; he knew this was the place for the city, and his confidence, and the substantial reasons he could give for it, made him the man to plead for the interests of Buffalo. The day was hot, and our advocate, says my informant, pulled off his coat, and according to the habit of his laborious life, worked for us all in his shirt sleeves! And Mr. Dart says that after the hearing, Gov. Clinton summed up the whole matter in a judicial way, letting it be quite distinctly seen that in his opinion this was the place for the city, and that here the canal should terminate. During the year 1822 or 1823, with great struggles the question was settled. The canal was to come to Buffalo. There were large-minded men here, who saw the opportunity, and with all their might laid hold of it.

The first thing to be done was to give Buffalo Creek a permanent stationary mouth, into which vessels could enter. It was a difficult and expensive work. Black Rock said it never could be done; but there were men here who said it should be done. But how? There was not ready money enough in the whole village to pay for such a work, and it was proposed that, if possible, \$12,000 should be obtained by loan from the State. A bond was made, and the names that went upon that bond for the loan should be known to every inhabitant of Buffalo. That was the hard lift, that the *magnam opus*—and showed the noble purpose and determination of the men who gave the bond. In their day of small things, all of them comparatively poor, they bound themselves for the means to make it seem possible that there could be a harbor at this point: everything depended on this. The State refused to do the experimental work; the Canal Commissioners doubted; and so four men put their names to the bond, and got the \$12,000 from the State; and with other money, private subscriptions in small sums from the villagers, to be given in labor, in shoes, in blacksmithing, in stone, in pork, in brush for fascines, the first breakwater was constructed, under the direction, and in part by the hands of Judge Wilkeson, in 1820 and 1821. These were the names upon that bond: at the head, and probably the originator of the plan, Samuel Wilkeson; let it stand upon his monument at Forest Lawn, of granite like his character—*urbem condidit*, he built the city; Charles Townsend and George Colt, young men from Connecticut, partners in a village trade; and Oliver Forward, a lawyer and strong-natured man; all these four are builders of the city. They took up the mountain, and cast it into the sea. Others helped—all worked then, when life and death for Buffalo hung on the ends of the balance. How little do we, who have entered into other men's labors, think how they struggled for what we so securely enjoy! There was Judge Wilkeson's breakwater, made of fascines, filled in with rocks and sand, and beamed together. Black Rock, and others, said the first spring storm would send the Judge's fascines down the Niagara in a hurry; and there was danger—Buffalo felt afraid. Mr. Henry Lovejoy says he remembers going, with two hundred men, down to the breakwater at the mouth of the creek in the spring of 1822, each with a shovel on his shoulder, that they might be there when the ice broke up and went out of the creek, and by shovelling manage the currents, and protect the new breakwater. They waited there all day, the creek still as dead, playing possum while they watched it. At dark they came home, hungry, tired, scolding at

commercial difficulties; and lo, in the night the flood burst out, as my informant says, turning the breakwater upside down; but the Judge had made it fast together, and so heavily weighted it with stone, that it held fast its integrity and kept its place; and to this day, the old cribs remain under the massive stone breakwater at the light house. The floods were foiled, and Black Rock was non-suited—Buffalo had a harbor, and a way to get into it, and out of it.

Meantime the Canal was making, and in 1825 came the grand opening of the New York highway between East and West; all clouds now had cleared away, and sunshine rested upon the fortunes of Buffalo.

We will not fail to do justice to those men who were the fathers and builders of our handsome-faced city; there were among them many large-minded, far-seeing men, and they gave their own great proportions to the city they builded: and the expression of our city's physiognomy tells of Ellicott and Wilkeson, and Townsend and Coit, and Forward and Heacock, Johnson and Pratt, and Love and Tracey, and Potter, and Joy and Webster; and Chapin, and the men who preached the Gospel, and those who taught the youth. Those men, the builders, almost all are gone; and if any one inquires for their monument, tell him to open his eyes and look around—*Circumspect!*

But the most of those men, who did so well, and the active men who came after them, are said to have made fools of themselves in the speculations of 1835, which were needed as wild here in Buffalo as anywhere in the country. There are old men in New England, and multitudes of them in Old England, who think of our beautiful city as wearing a fool's face, because it had the speculation mania badly. Let me say a word about this. We deny that there is a single deep mark of a fool in the physiognomy of our city. The folly was only a passing shade. The fact is, we all make fools of ourselves sometime, in some way, and the only question among us is of more or less. Go read how the canny Scotchmen, about 1694, were maddened and befooled by the Darien speculation, which had no other basis than a dream-idea which one Paterson had of opening a passage across the Isthmus of Darien. Fletcher, of Saltoun, chiefly known by his saying, "Let me make a nation's songs, and whoever will may make their laws," wise as he was, had this fever, and others among the shrewdest; and for six years, cold Scotia was all aflame, and then came utter collapse of the emptiness. Go read how Paris, all France indeed, was befooled, in 1718, by John Law, and his scheme of the Mississippi and India Company, a magnificent humbug hatched in the brain of one single man; all Paris went crazy for three or four years;—more absurd things are told of, than were ever done here.

But England claims never to lose common sense. Go read of her South Sea mania in 1720. The whole nation was affected, from the throne to the cottage. The idea was to get gold and silver by going round Cape Horn to Peru and Mexico. The scheme was called the Earl of Oxford's masterpiece. Spain, powerful then, never allowed them to do a thing towards realizing their idea; but knaves blew it up into the most magnificent bubble, and for four or five years the South Sea mania and its mighty Company swelled with gigantic pretensions; it would shoulder the whole national debt of £31,000,000 sterling—it would pour riches into every house; it swelled, AND THEN it burst; and English Common Sense was seen, with foolish and enraged look, staring at the floating vapors! The mania of speculation here was not so strange,—there was foundation

to stand upon. From the opening of the canal in 1825, there was a *rush* of western emigration through Buffalo—each year it grew greater than before; the canal was crowded; hotels all full; warehouses groaned under their burdens; vessels and steamers could not be built fast enough for the demands of business. I was here in the autumn of 1835, and one morning I was at the dock, with many other strangers, gazing upon the mighty heaving western tide. There was a pile of goods and furniture all along on Joy & Webster's wharf, more than twenty feet high, and upon the top of it sat as many as a dozen Senecas, men and women; they too, with the rest of us, gazing with astonishment at this sudden flood of life sweeping over them, coming they knew not whence, and going they knew not whither. It was marvellous! Land was wanted, land to stand upon—land to speculate with; land was gold. And *then* it seemed that all the opening West was to come with its harvest contributions floating right to Buffalo. Railroads then were not much thought of for carrying freight; to this point came the Lake—from this went the Canal—and here might be the New York of the West; and so it would have been, but for the coming of railroads to compete with vessels for the carrying trade. It was not strange that the men here made a great mistake, got wild with hope, and that some were hoisted upon their bubbles to get very bad falls; but generally there was some basis to speculation, it was not all idea and dream; there were real facts enough to make sensible men hope prodigiously. It may seem very wise to look back and laugh at the old builders and business men of Buffalo, but they were wiser than Solomon, compared with Scotland, France, and England, when their ravings came.

I love to think what those men of Buffalo in 1835, in their great hope, meant to do here. The merchants were to have an Exchange filling Clarendon Square, and with a towering dome two hundred and twenty-five feet above the pavement. Com. Perry was to have a monument of white marble in front of the churches, one hundred feet high, with graceful carving, armorial bearings, and emblematic statues. Education was to have the University of Western New York with magnificent endowment, and the foremost men of the country in its various departments. Nor were the good intents all on paper merely; one of the wildest of the hoppers did actually start a free public school for sixty scholars, children of the poor, and kept it open and flourishing for several years. I honor men who, if they do get crazed by enterprise and too much hope, show themselves large-minded and nobly generous, grateful to patriots, munificent to education, mindful of the poor, and anxious to bestow true riches and quickened life upon posterity! With the mind's eye, behold our city's physiognomy, as the great hoppers meant it should be, with the beautiful Perry monument, and the University of Western New York with its grand buildings on North street, rivalling Harvard or Yale, and society graced and improved by its teachers and students; and with a commerce on the Lake, that might require a Merchants' Exchange as large and high as was dreamed of. Despite the ridicule upon those builders' failure, the future may fulfill their expectation more nearly than we think.

In regard to faces, association does wonders; the old adage comes true—handsome is, that handsome does; even homely features may get so blent with truth, love, and nobleness, that to the mind's eye they are beautiful. The kind, good woman, though with no line of grace or beauty in form or face, who has left home and friends, and for the sake of mercy gone to the hospitals, becomes beautiful as an angel to the sick soldier, as she

bends over him with a mother's tenderness, striving to relieve his anguish; and just so it is with cities' faces. There is little Calais, in France: to my mind it has always worn a halo of glory, ever since in my old school book I read how Edward III. of England was about to put the city to fire and sword, but consented to spare the inhabitants, and their homes and children, if six of the principal men of the city would volunteer to come bare-headed and bare-footed, with halters about their necks, to be hanged in view of his besieging, victorious army; and the martyr heroes came, Eustace De St. Pierre at their head. Such nobleness has given interest and beauty to Calais for all these five hundred years! The old pilgrims of 1620 gave a glory to the unromantic shores and barren hills of Plymouth, and travellers will not cease to go to that shrine of lofty self-sacrifice to truth and freedom, to gaze upon the brave, heroic face of that landscape. And, alas! how the face of a city that is fair enough to the outward sight, may to the mind's eye get a look of deformity, that will make outward comeliness as nothing. There is New York, imperial city, at the gates of the world's commerce, the waters gathering around her as if anxious to bear her freighted keels; but, O, that hard, meanly cruel scowl upon her face, wrought there by riot against law, and savage massacre of weak, unoffending men, women, and children, because God had made them with a dark skin! And, let the truth be told, our own city got an ugly mark, a stain not readily washed out, by just the beginning of similar riot and bloodshed. Sin destroys beauty!

Look far away towards the sunset—to the golden horn of the West, where San Francisco, Queen of the Pacific, sits beside the sea. She has been noble. Though so far away, and tempted to stand aloof in selfish isolation, she has felt the laboring heart-beat of the Union and of liberty, and while bearing her share of public burden, she has sent hundreds of thousands to the Sanitary Commission. With generous loyalty she turns toward us, and stretches out her arms to help. To the mind's eye, how noble and fair the face of that young Pacific Queen! Handsome is, that handsome does.

The builders of our city have done their work, and on the whole have done it well. They have made for us a dwelling-place with open, finely-formed features, and their earnest, generous spirit gives a handsome expression. But Buffalo is not finished: generations yet to come are still to be builders, and every one of us, in public or private life, is giving expression more and more, good or bad, to our city's face.



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